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### Mythology, performativity, and moral panic

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## Mythology, Performativity, and Moral Panic: The Case of Norwegian Black Metal

The legacy of the Satanic panic is etched upon the histories of popular and underground cultures alike. Decades after lurid accounts of ritualised abuse, violence and murder were resoundingly discredited, concern for the safeguarding of children and young people still readily slips into histrionic indictments of malevolent forces at work, encompassing such diverse media as horror films, video games, and even the seemingly-innocuous territory of [Peppa Pig's YouTube channel](#).

The highly-performative realm of alternative music has frequently been the target of such public anxiety; accusations of Satanism became commonplace throughout the 1980s, often coupled with fantastical allegations of 'deviant' sexual practices, violence, and even cannibalism. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, these eruptions of moral panic became increasingly accusatory and, in some cases, punitive – consider Marilyn Manson's trial by media following the 1999 Columbine school shooting, [Russia's attempt to ban 'emo' clothing and hairstyles](#), and, more recently, the (racially-inflected) links drawn between [youth violence and UK drill music](#). This retributive turn arguably has its roots in the UK's [Criminal Justice and Public Order Act \(1994\)](#), which prohibited outdoor gatherings that centred around "sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (or, in simpler terms, open-air raves that played house music).

In this febrile landscape, the early Norwegian black metal scene is a rare example of moralising angst being founded upon actual instances of arson, suicide, and murder. Nonetheless, these events are beset by exaggeration – a mythology has enveloped the movement, one that may have been initiated by the musicians themselves, but was ultimately cemented by the media. The scene was riven by contradiction and internal conflict, leading to a brinksmanship that resulted in several deaths and the destruction of numerous churches. Black metal has experienced a new surge of interest thanks to Jonas Åkerlund's recent film, *Lords of Chaos*, a dramatisation of the rise of bands Mayhem and Burzum that stoked [journalistic ire](#) for its graphic depiction of self-injury, suicide, and murder. Yet despite its flair for the melodramatic, the film's thematic undercurrents of frustration, isolation, and the dark repercussions of toxic masculinity resonate strongly today.

Characterised by heavy distortion, screamed or growled vocals, extremely fast drumming, and low-fi production values, influential 'second wave' black metal bands such as Mayhem thrived upon controversy and theatricality. Founder and guitarist Øystein Aarseth, who adopted the demonic pseudonym 'Euronymous', immediately began a promotional campaign that emphasised the band's dark and 'evil' qualities. Aarseth's casual invocation of Satanism chimed with the anti-Christian philosophies touted by bands forming the 'first wave' of black metal, including Bathory (who later admitted that their Satanic references were never based on genuine belief), and Mercyful Fate (whose lead singer is a follower of LaVeyan Satanism).

Mayhem's aesthetic changed with the arrival of lead singer Per Yngve Ohlin, known as 'Dead'. Ohlin introduced the black and white corpsepaint makeup that would become characteristic of the band. The (relatively few) live shows they performed were provocative and highly staged, sometimes featuring decaying pigs' heads impaled on stakes, which would eventually be thrown into the audience. Ohlin became notorious for his obsession with death, and began

to incorporate acts of self-harm into his performances. To this day, no account of the band is complete without reference to the rotting magpie Ohlin kept in a plastic bag under his bed, or the fact that he would bury his clothes in the ground, and talked endlessly of death.

Mayhem's self-image as evil and unknowable was, of course, entirely constructed. None of its members were practicing Satanists, and despite occasionally parroting right-wing views, they were a largely apolitical collective. Like their punk predecessors in the UK, Mayhem's disjointed invocations of fascism, Satanism, and advocating for violence and destruction were pure provocation (drummer Jan Axel 'Hellhammer' Blomberg infamously claimed the lyrics of 'Freezing Moon' were "meant to make people commit suicide").

Beneath this performative incitement, however, lie more troubling questions regarding the sensationalising of self-injury and suicide. Several of Ohlin's bandmates suggested that he suffered from [severe depression](#) – friends recall that he often told them he was not fully human, that the blood in his veins was frozen, and that he was dead, suggesting that he may have experienced Cotard's syndrome (a rare condition, where the person holds the delusion that they do not exist, or are already dead). However, his onstage self-harm was enthusiastically received by Mayhem's fans (grimly foreshadowing Richey Edwards of the Manic Street Preachers, whose public act of self-injury was ranked in *Q Magazine's* '100 Greatest Images', and even made into a [t-shirt](#)). On 8 April 1991, the 22-year-old Ohlin took his own life. Unfortunately, this too was gratuitously sensationalised, first by Aarseth, whose reaction on finding his friend's body was to photograph the scene, and then by fans, who circulated false rumours of desecration and cannibalism.

Nearly three decades after the fact, a young man's death by suicide is still a subject of morbid fascination. In 1995, the photograph of Ohlin's corpse appeared on the cover of Mayhem's bootleg live album, *Dawn of the Black Hearts*. Writers recounting the history of black metal linger salaciously over the precise details of Ohlin's death and, if we were left in any doubt, Åkerlund's film re-enacts the event in harrowing, step-by-step detail (the same treatment is also applied to Aarseth's horrific murder by fellow musician Varg Vikernes).

While media outlets and church groups debate whether *Lords of Chaos* ought to be [banned](#), however, it feels like an essential point is being skimmed over. In mythologising Ohlin's life and death, we draw a veil over the reality of his distress, his depression, and his deep sense of isolation. His self-injurious behaviour is often framed as performative, part of a stage persona, or indicative of his 'ultimate' black metal credentials; interviewed 15 years after Ohlin's death, bassist Jørn 'Necrobutcher' Stubberud argued that his "issues" were ultimately "[good for the band](#)." This narrative recurs throughout much of the literature documenting the history of Mayhem, but it is not limited to the (admittedly niche) Norwegian black metal scene. Indeed, this type of erasure is both troubling and toxic. The emphasis on performativity reiterates the recurring and deeply unhelpful tendency to frame self-harm as 'attention-seeking' behaviour, and reaffirms stereotypes around the gendering of self-injury – one cannot help but wonder if the [narrative might read rather differently](#) had Ohlin been a young woman.

Ohlin and Aarseth's tragically short lives will no doubt continue to generate fascination and spawn further retellings of these events. Sensationalising suffering has a distancing effect, but

responsible reporting can stimulate genuinely helpful analysis. I would argue that, today, valuable lessons might still be learned from early black metal controversies: as the recent [Holden Matthews case](#) suggests, however, we ignore them at our peril.